

TOWN PLANNING AND CONSERVATION OF LIFE

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Arthur G. Dalzell
Town Planning and Real Estate
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Canada, Commission of Conservation

TOWN PLANNING AND REAL ESTATE

*Address by A. G. Dalzell, at conference of Inter-State Realty Association of the Pacific Northwest, at Spokane, Wash., July 16, 1920.

TOWN planning has been opposed in the past by those interested in the sale of real estate, because they contended that it would tend to limit the sale of land. No doubt it would; but, after the experience of the past, are even those who are interested in the sale of real estate anxious to see new "paper cities" established? Let me give one example of a paper subdivision from a Canadian city.

In a Canadian prairie city of under 50,000 people, a quarter section of land two miles from the city centre was brought within the city limits. The general assessment of farm land outside the city limits was about \$50 an acre, but on being taken into the city this assessment was raised to over \$1,000 an acre. When taxed at this rate, there was, of course no alternative but to subdivide the land and place it on the market as building land. A subdivision plan showed 1,465 lots, each 25 feet by 124 feet, and on the strength of this the land was sold to English investors for \$249,000. The following year the assessment was raised to \$320,000, or an average of \$210 a lot, or \$2,000 an acre. The highest price paid for a lot in the area was \$350. At that time the city wished to borrow large sums to carry on extensive public works. Its charter gave it power to borrow up to twenty per cent of the assessment, which on this property would equal \$64,000. As the city did not borrow up to its full limit, we will assume that on the strength of this assessment it borrowed, say \$40,000, on long term debentures. Seven years afterwards the assessed value of the property was only a little over \$27,000, for, whilst a few lots have been sold, no actual building has taken place. In six years the English owners had paid in taxes more than the land is now assessed for, and the only revenue obtained from the property is \$50 per annum for grazing rights.

It is, of course, obvious that if the owners of this property cannot afford to pay taxes on something like the original valuation, the interest and sinking fund required to redeem the bonded indebtedness will have to be found by other land owners.

In the subdivision of this section principles were carried out which have been accepted in the past by competent real estate authorities. Richard M. Hurd, President of the Lawyers' Mortgage Company, New York, in his book "Principles of City Land Values," has this to say about the subdivision of land for city purposes:

"The unit, both as to depth and width of lot for which a plat should be built up, consists of the average shop in the business district and the average dwelling in the residence district. Since the growth of cities leads normally to the conversion of residence land into business land, a uniform system of platting suitable for business purposes throughout the entire city is generally preferable. Such a system need not necessarily lead to small holdings in the residence sections, although it has a tendency in that direction."

In the case I have quoted we have a subdivision of 1,465 twenty-five foot lots, a size everywhere condemned for residential purposes, and with only slight advantages for some business purposes. But why should land two miles from a city centre be subdivided into over 1,400 lots suitable for business purposes? Or why, if it is intended to start with residences, should provision be made for 7,000 people without a site being set aside for any school or community building, or provision being made for parks or recreation grounds?

Systematic town planning would make such a subdivision impossible, and would incidentally prevent either such an inflation or such a

depreciation of land values as I have described in the above city. Is this experience of English investors likely to induce further investment on their part in Canadian townsites? Land booms in western cities have almost ceased, and cities are now endeavouring to induce industries to locate within their limits. One of the greatest handicaps to industrial location in cities is the securing of industrial sites. In such a subdivision as I have instanced, a block of 40 lots, having an area of from $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 acres, is sometimes held by 30 different owners, even if the land is still vacant. No manufacturer can afford to deal with such a multiplicity of owners, even if he can overcome the difficulties of the shallow depth of lot, and so manufacturers are forced to secure sites outside city limits, whilst much land is left derelict inside the limits, necessitating extravagant cost in the provision of public utilities, street works, and policing, and involving a serious loss of time twice a day in the transportation of workers from their homes to the workshops.

Most of the cities in Western Canada, when the surrounding municipalities are included, have sufficient land subdivided to accommodate any population that will enter the territory for many years to come. Streets and building sites have been laid out in the districts immediately adjacent to Vancouver alone, which would provide for a population half the size of the present population of the whole Dominion.

If land is to be regarded as a safe and profitable investment, and not merely as a stake for gambling, with a few big prizes and a multitude of blanks, protection must be given, not merely for the benefit of the landowner, but in the interest of the community at large. Mr. Thomas Adams, the Town Planning Adviser of the Commission of Conservation, contends that the development of city land must be restricted and controlled if cities are to be saved from bankruptcy. Many cities of under 100,000 people are developing and maintaining streets and public utilities which would serve from five to ten times the present population. Under present taxation systems the bulk of this burden falls on the owners of real estate; and this is one of the reasons why real estate as an investment of wealth has failed to attract.

The first form of protection which I may mention is "zoning." Zoning, or "districting," is an essential of city planning, and is the only possible solution of some of our most troublesome city problems. A zone which ought to be established at once in many cities is the zone of immediate development. In any city that has an area larger than that of a standard township, or cities surrounded with municipalities having large areas, and with scattered population, some area should be defined as the zone of immediate development, and public works and utilities refused to outside areas until they can be installed on a commercial and economic basis. Every city, whether large or small, if its development is to be carried out on economical lines, and if its real estate has to have a stable value, must adopt zoning. In most western cities of to-day, direction of growth, main avenues of transportation and other zone defining factors are fairly well known, and zoning is easier in consequence, and less likely to cause an injurious effect on the development of business and industry, than it would have been a few years ago. The sale of real estate in the past was facilitated by the uncertainty of future development. It is handicapped to-day by that very uncertainty, for people look seriously at the risk of loss. In nearly every city without zoning laws we find property values jeopardized by the want of restriction on the use of land. Where there is no restriction we find that industries invade the residential districts. Beautiful homes are spoiled by the erection of public garages or undertaking parlours on the adjoining lots, or by unsightly corner stores; expensive public schools

have their efficiency spoiled by the erection of noisy boiler shops or nuisance industries, hospitals are menaced by fire hazards from wood-working establishments, and the industrial establishments themselves thwart one another's development. Most cities have realized the value of municipally defined industrial areas. "Industrial island," in Vancouver, a very recent creation, made by filling in a part of False creek, has already justified its establishment, because it provides sites of suitable shape with rail and water transportation facilities.

Any city that is cursed with too great subdivision of land into 25 or 33 foot lots, will soon find that if it is to attract any large industries within its boundaries at all, some revision of these subdivisions must be made. On the other hand industries cannot exist without workers; and it is just as necessary that a section or sections of the city should be set apart for the erection of single family dwelling houses for the industrial workers, as it is that sites should be provided for the establishment of the industries. The one feature is the necessary corollary of the other. The establishment of individual homes is considered the best safeguard of the morals, the health, the wealth and the contentment of any city, and every effort should be made to provide, to protect and to preserve such homes. Large employers of labour have discovered their value in securing contented and healthy workmen, increasing the labour output, and reducing the loss through sickness, absenteeism and labour turnover.

Up till the present the securing of small homesites for industrial workers has not been well directed as a rule. Plenty of inducements have been offered to the worker to purchase land, but in many cases the inducement held out has not been the idea of establishing himself a permanent home, but that of a speculation on his part. Many workers have been handicapped for life, and have had to deprive their children of educational and other advantages, because of the drain on their income in keeping up payments on property not really fitted to serve them as a home site.

In an Ontario city of under 20,000 population, I recently investigated a subdivision where Ukrainians, Galicians, Poles, Italians and Greeks were induced to settle on land which was pre-eminently suitable on account of proximity to lake and rail transportation for industrial development, but which on account of drainage difficulties and exposed situation was an almost impossible site for ordinary city development. This land was subdivided in the usual way into small lots and sold at high prices, in fact in 1908 was selling at a higher price per square foot of building land than was paid in the same year for land in Hampstead Garden Suburbs, 45 minutes' journey from the heart of London, England, and at that time regarded as the last word in the layout of residential land in the London area. The Ontario subdivision is to-day a slum of the worst character, a collection of ugly, dilapidated shacks where the people crowd together to keep warm in the winter time, the density of population in some blocks having gone as high as 64 to the acre. It is an eyesore and a menace to the city, though the land value on unimproved areas without public utilities still stands at over \$2,800 per acre and the taxation on this value is four per cent. In Hampstead Garden Suburb the land maintains its value and justifies the establishment of the estate. As one illustration of this let us compare the rates of infantile mortality.

When the infant mortality rate (*i.e.*, the number of deaths under one year per 1,000 births) in England and Wales was 109, the district of Hampstead was 85, but Hampstead Garden Suburbs was 40. In the section of the Ontario city I have referred to the rate was 250—that is, every fourth child born in the area died within the first twelve months,

and the medical officer of health says at least one-half can be attributed to the unhealthy site and defective housing.

Early in 1918 I made a study of the cost of city development of an industrial-worker district in Vancouver. I also took to compare with it a high-class residential district just outside the city limits. As Assistant City Engineer I had official relations with both, and had facilities for obtaining accurate data. A brief summary may be given here.

The working class district, now known as Ward 8, of the city of Vancouver, contains some 400 acres, and was annexed to the city in 1911. About the same time the Canadian Pacific railway was completing the development of 400 acres just outside the city limits. Both areas, however, are between two and two and one-half miles from the city centre, and they are bounded on the north and south by the same avenues. The district annexed to the city is subdivided on standard rectangular lines, mainly into 33-foot and 25-foot lots, nearly 2,400 in all.

It was occupied at the time of annexation by some 3,000 industrial workers, or people of moderate means, and there were only a very few residences which exceeded \$2,000 in value. Three arterial thoroughfares traversed the district; there was thus some opportunity for speculating as to the location of business and the probable car-line streets. This led to an inflation of land values, even though the area was never controlled by large interests, but remained in the hands of many small owners. At the present time not more than five per cent of the improved lots are occupied by other buildings than residences. The price to which land soared under these conditions is revealed in the assessment, which, when it was annexed to the city and before any public improvements had been installed, was equal to \$10,000 per net building acre. That this assessment was not beyond the prevailing land value is shown by the fact that the city, being compelled to purchase school and park sites to the extent of over 7 acres, had to pay an average price of more than \$19,000 per acre.

Though \$3,500 has been spent on street development and the provision of watermains and sewers for every building acre, the average assessed land value for the whole area is now about \$8,742 per building acre. But notwithstanding this still high assessment, the whole of the revenue obtained from the property is barely sufficient to carry interest and sinking fund charges on capital expenditures. It follows, therefore, that the other landowners within the city have to bear the whole cost of the schools, fire and police protection, garbage collection, and general maintenance of the district. There is nothing in the district to call for special comment. It is the far too common type of city development, with houses, stores, and industries all crammed together in some blocks, and other blocks with hardly an improved lot, no attempt at arrangement, no building lines, no segregation of business or industry, a simple go-as-you-please, take-what-you-can development.

In the area selected by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company for development as a high-class residential district, for houses of not less than \$5,000 in value, controlled by building lines and building restrictions, with all business and industry excluded, the streets were formed and surfaced, finished with cement sidewalks, boulevards planted, watermains and sewers installed with services to the property line, and yet sites were obtainable with all these improvements and safeguards at a price as low as the average assessed value of the working-class district, where there were no improvements and no safeguards.

City planning explains the difference both in the original cost and the final result. Hampstead Garden Suburb and Shaughnessy Heights were both planned as residential districts. The promoters knew that

there was a sum which purchasers would willingly pay for homesites on the property, and the selling value of the land was fixed accordingly. They knew that building regulations would wipe out a great part of the usual early speculative value, but they also knew that such regulations would stabilise the permanent factors in the value. Whilst purchasers who were unable to live on the property could only look for a moderate return from rentals, it would be fairly well guaranteed, and resale would not be difficult, thus the security would be good even if the return were low. In the subdivision of the two working-class districts to which I have referred, and in many other cases, the bait to the purchaser was the speculative element. The bait, however, often swelled to such a size that not even a whale of industry or business could swallow it.

This is an age in which "efficiency" is a great catchword. Industrial efficiency, commercial efficiency, national efficiency and personal efficiency are terms constantly before us. An industry or business noted for efficiency is certain to have a higher capital rating than one without that reputation or with a poor reputation, and the stocks or bonds representing the capital of such a concern are sure to be sought after.

If we aim to secure commercial, municipal, national, or even personal efficiency, we cannot afford to neglect city planning any longer. To begin with, there is room for change of method in the original subdivision of land, so as to secure both economy and efficiency. In the rectangular system of street layout, which is generally accepted by any municipal authority as standard town planning, the proportion of street area varies from not less than 30 to as high as 45 per cent, and the writer knows of one Canadian city where, in less than 500 acres of total area, half is community-owned. In seven typical industrial developments carried out by Mr. John Nolen, one of America's foremost town planning engineers, the average of street area is 25.7 per cent, and in two residential districts planned by Mr. Thomas Adams at Ottawa the average is under 23 per cent.

The cause of the difference in the percentage of street area is well known. In the desire to avoid the too narrow thoroughfares of the older countries, most cities here have adopted a standard width for every road, usually far too narrow for main arterial roads, and far too wide for secondary or residential streets. In most cities to-day the expense of street works and street maintenance is one of the greatest burdens of municipal taxation. By proper street planning we can reduce the area by one-third and yet get better results. Capital and annual expenditures will be saved, as well as a great amount of time which is now lost by travelling over unnecessary street space. By systematic planning we can group our industries together, the streets which serve them can be properly surfaced, the watermains and sewers adapted to their requirements, the time required for interchange of commodities between different industrial establishments materially lessened, and the time and cost of transfer of manufactured articles from factory to rail or wharf greatly reduced. Much concern is often expressed over ocean freights; but it is too often forgotten that the cost of trucking a manufactured article from factory to wharf is frequently more than the ocean freight from one continent to another.

Once we secure a good industrial location, if within easy reach of it we have a district where the industrial worker may reside, he may be saved an hour a day of straphanging on street cars, he may have a home safeguarded against the intrusion of foundry or factory, and even preserved from the shadow of an apartment or tenement house. In such a residential district the streets would be so planned that the cost of constructing them and keeping them in good order would not be a burden on the homeowner. Instead of wide, dusty or muddy roads as

the only playground for the children, the area saved by the adoption of more reasonable width would be consolidated into large school playgrounds and parks. By that time we shall have gone a long way to securing industrial efficiency, through obtaining personal efficiency of healthy and contented employees.

If we have also a well established business district, all those whose commercial interests are related will be grouped together, and much valuable time saved, and the owners of homes will not run the risk of having their investments reduced by the intrusion of business houses into any residential districts.

If such plans are adopted in any city, the real estate may experience some change in values during the period of adjustment. Some values may indeed drop. Eventually, however, true values will be established, which will tend to grow and seldom decline. Investment in such real estate will be a genuine investment, bringing regular returns, and the disposal of such investment, if desired at any time, will be greatly facilitated.

Town planning in America in the past has been far too closely confined to the spectacular. There has been little thought of the social side of the subject, no clear vision of the future, no appreciation of the city as a permanent thing or as an agency of social welfare. Even to-day town planning is often misunderstood. To quote Professor Patrick Geddes:—

“Town planning is supposed by many to be a new and special branch of engineering; by others, of sanitation; by others again, of building, or again of architecture, or gardening, or other fine arts. But these differing opinions show that town planning—and let us now use its greater name of city design—is not a new specialism added to existing ones; but that it is the returning co-ordination of them all towards civic well being. It is the civic aspect of the higher and more general level of public and personal thinking which has long been here and there arising. Such more general thinking is now beginning to dominate the unorganized thought of the past and passing generations of specialists, who have been so strong in details but so weak in co-ordinating these. But such scientific philosophy lies in details taken together as factors of life; whilst the corresponding arts of life, and practically therefore of city design, are co-ordinating them towards life more suddenly.

“As the physician must make a diagnosis of the patient's case before prescribing treatment, so with the planner for a city. He looks closely into the city as it is, and how it has grown and suffered. And, as the physician associates the patient with his own cure, so must the planner appeal to the citizen—he may check and amplify the diagnosis. Successful treatment must be general and constitutional, for though every disease has many outcomes to be relieved, health is a unity, the unity of a sound mind in a sound body. How is this unity to be obtained? Are we simply to go on mainly as at present, providing as many remedies as there are diseases, and now drugging, now inoculating each other against them all, or may there not be some more general way?”

As town planners we feel that in our endeavours to secure a healthier development we must associate with us all those who are primarily interested in the material on which all our work is based—the land. If owners of land are in sympathy with our endeavours, our work will be much easier. If they are against us, our work will be difficult, if not impossible. I have attempted to show that in their own interests the support of the landowners and land agents of city planning movements is urgently required, and I feel sure they are able both to check and amplify the diagnosis I have made.

OTTAWA GARDEN SUBURB

LINDENLEA, the garden suburb of Ottawa, the development of which is being carried out under the administration of the Ottawa Housing Commission, has already established a standard for housing development. The sort of street system—if lines at right angles to each other can be called system—by which most of our housing developments have been straight-jacketed, cannot stand the competition of such projects as Lindenlea, which is but fifteen minutes' ride from the heart of the city.

Such developments are bound to have a profound effect for good throughout the country. They represent an escape from the gridiron development and give a freedom to domestic life which is spiritual as well as physical. Workers who have lived in such towns will not be content with less advantageous surroundings. Building operations must equal these developments or go out of business sooner or later.

If it is worth while, as a civic policy, to encourage escape from congestion to better and healthier living conditions, it is worth while to study out and provide means whereby recreation and neighbourhood can be stimulated.

In the ten-year period prior to 1911 the population of the County of London, England, had fallen off to the extent of 0.3 per cent, whereas in the outer fringes of the metropolitan areas it had increased 33.5 per cent in the same period. This rapidity of decentralization of city population is becoming nearly as great in this country.

There is, however, an imperative need for social and recreative facilities in developments of this kind. This movement has come into prominence since the war, and must be taken into account in preparing housing and town planning schemes.

Men and women returning home from service in the army, used to the recreative huts in camp, have awakened their fellow citizens to the need for social centres, where they can meet their friends and enjoy mutual intercourse during the evenings or find means of self-expression in music, dancing or art.

Suggestions are now under consideration at Lindenlea to promote such a social community project, with the hope of realization when the Community Hall is built.

The progress made with this scheme will be appreciated by recalling that it was not until the autumn of 1919 that building operations were commenced, whereas now over 60 houses are completed or nearly so and further contracts have been placed for the erection of another fifty.

The roads are now taking shape, emphasizing the physical expression of the development; also, by utilizing the surplus rock and boulders incidental to the excavation of the houses, the wading pool is being formed. Even the casual visitor must be impressed by the rewarded efforts of the home builders' random rubble paths, grass lawns and beautiful flowers, which are only part of the evidence of the effect of community life under favourable conditions.

It is the duty of all to co-operate in a social and democratic way to create attractive local communities on the outskirts of cities wherever practicable, thereby working in accordance with the broader meaning of housing reform, defined as the furnishing of healthful accommodation purchasable at reasonable prices, adequately provided with facilities for privacy and comfort, easily accessible to centres of employment, culture and amusement, and accessible from the centre of distribution of the food supply.—*B. Evan Parry.*

NOTE:—A plan of Lindenlea appeared in *Town Planning and Conservation of Life*, April-June, 1920.